

In March of 1953, a young rancher pal east of San Angelo in Coleman County called, reporting the following non-stop message: "Got my note renewed for 90 days yesterday — Dad and Mother cosigned. Rained three inches last night. Remember where the cook stove is? If you don't, I do. It's underneath a leak in the roof that's been holding for 13 months."

The chronicler of the report called from his three-room batch outfit plenty excited about a day off from burning the thorns off prickly pear cactus for black cows running over the hose and slobbering over the dry ground. He wasn't born of the land, but he was learning that he preferred hearing raindrops splattering on a tin roof over brown topsoil fogging through the cracks in the walls of his old ranch house, as had been the case ever since he settled 13 months previous.

Further, his pastures watered from dirt tanks, or ponds might be the more universal name. In ranch language, the geographic designation was tank country. Neighbors were already hauling water from low, muddy water holes in the Colorado River. His tanks stood perilously low before the rain. Where the flood water didn't wash out the dams, water levels rose to safe heights.

Do note that cow brutes develop powerful thirst watching water pouring from a barrel into a trough caked with dry moss and black mud. Desperate stands for survival rate hauling water as the final curtain for a cow outfit. Tough old desert woolies develop water belly from a light dew, but a hollow horn needs three percent of her body weight in water every day until the source dries; then her needs increase and surpass a watermelon vine.

The three inches ran the creeks and flooded the shortgrass country. Over in San Angelo, car races scheduled in a lakebed were dropped because of runoff in the basin. Unless I have the wrong year for this flood, the rodeo and fat stock show was on in the Wool Capitol. I think I am right because some of my partners, in for the rodeo, allowed their exuberance over the rains to underestimate the effects of the brews offered in the Angelo watering spots and tomahawks of dance halls, or that was the report from prejudiced parties such as wives and serious girlfriends soon to be wives.

I know part of the story is accurate, as the ones of us stranded at the ranch, rationing coffee and worrying if we had enough tobacco to last until the draws ran down, bore deep sorrows and wrenching regrets over being safe and sober at the ranch, unable to join the celebration.

Six weeks, maybe two months passed before my partner called again. The time, I'm sure, was 2 a.m. on a weekend. The connection was clear, the message unclear. Below follows as close a recollection as possible after more than 50 years of time.

Friend: "You gonna have to come get me, Monte."

Myself: "Where am I going to find you?"

Friend: "You know how a crowd gathers."

Myself: "No, I don't know how crowds gather. Crowds don't gather on Dry Spring Creek Draw at two in the morning."

(Next came the receiver dropping and voices clattering to an inaudible exchange between persons — one a woman.)

A Woman: "He's at the Loma Alta store between Del Rio and Sonora. Come get him. I'll feed him breakfast if he can eat solid food by then. Bring your windmill cable to fish his truck from the ditch."

The rescue expedition began by leaving the ranch way before daylight, loaded with chains, axe, shovel, and cable. Keep in mind that herders knew each other in those days. Banks trusted us; checks were easy to cash. In sum, we towed the wreck from sight to avoid embarrassing questions from peace officers, gave the lady a kid goat

dressed the evening before, and were back at the ranch safe by midday.

How long we went without rain the next dry span is lost in memory. The whole land fell under a pall of gloom. Vegetable gardens turned fallow and wilted. Little yellow Jersey milk cows failed to rebreed. Blue bugs, the scourge of the chicken houses, flourished in epidemic proportions. Early and late frosts killed back the fruit trees. Trips to the bank became grim episodes for the customers and the jugkeepers.

And my pal? My pal ranched up his dad's and mother's patience. He was able to make his pickup run for the three-year course of his career. I helped him mark his first calf crop. The numbers are lost, but the whole work took half a day, so the percentage must have been small.

I have the years close to right. Crowds can gather, you know, on any date, on a desolate stretch of road leading to the Mexican border town of Ciudad Acuna.